

**Jan Váchal**

# **Text Messages Don't Cry:**

**How to run a half-marathon**

A dynamic comedy about how to make it through a half-marathon alive

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# Cast

**Simona -**

sports instructor, leader of a preparatory seminar for aspirant half-marathon runners

**Textina –**

conveyor of SMS text messages

*(Simona jogs onto and around the stage before stopping at its centre. She is in sportswear.)*

Simona: Greetings, sports and running fans! My name's Simona, and I'm a coach and then some. Think of me as your running guru. For your sins, you have all decided to run this year's half-marathon. No doubt you've come here in the foolish belief that you can do it. So let me tell you straight: you're a long way short at the moment. A long way. But when I'm done with you, running a marathon will be all in a day's work. Some of you will even discover the full-marathon runner inside. They don't call me Brutal Simona for nothing, you know.

Today's class is an introduction. It's about laying ground rules. No one but me will break a sweat. We'll talk a bit about running techniques and how to warm up. What to wear on your body and feet. Adjusting your diet and fluid intake in the preparation period. Keeping your mojo when you're running your race. Brandishing the winner's trophy in the correct fashion. Next time, though, we'll meet at the playing fields. And I promise you we'll run the running track ragged.

Today, for the last time, you can sit comfortably in your seats and enjoy yourselves. Because once I've beaten into you all the theory that is indispensable to your efforts, there'll be nothing but blood and sweat to show for it, then more of the same.

*(Simona begins to jog on the spot.)*

Above all else, running is a joy. I'm just crazy about it. As we're all athletes here, I'll let you in on a secret. There are three things I get really high on. Running, sending text messages from my mobile phone, and Luke. Luke's my boyfriend, although he hasn't quite figured that out yet. You know how it goes. Softly, softly, catchee monkey. The great thing is, my three passions are easy to combine. When I'm running after Luke, to write and send texts is the easiest thing in the world to do.

Textina: *(Textina appears.)* Beep. You're coming on Sunday, I hope? Mum

Simona: *(Looking at her mobile.)* Sorry. It's my mum. *(She puts the phone away.)*

I write about a hundred of these messages a day, you know. *(She points at Textina, who dips into a curtsy.)* A good half of them to

Luke. I go by the principle – let’s call it my credo – that if it hasn’t been captured in a text, it’s not there. But once it’s been texted, it’s set in stone.

Anyway, about running. First of all, why do it? Well, you surely have a motivating factor, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Maybe it’s about self-improvement. Maybe it’s about getting the better of someone at your workplace. Or getting fitter. Or being healthier. Or shedding a few excess pounds. Add to this the joy of movement, beating stress, improved sexual performance, and, last but not least, safety. Very few perverts are up for a seven-mile chase in the park. A perfect example of how running away from something isn’t always a bad thing. And if someone runs away from you, you’ll soon catch up with them.

It’s all relative, of course. Take Luke, my boyfriend. He doesn’t make it easy for me. We’ve known each other for ages, you know. Since nursery school.

Looking back, nursery school was one long party. All play, eating and sleeping. Nothing to worry about, no responsibilities. On one side of the room, girls wrestling each other for the doll’s pram. On the other, boys fighting over a Matchbox car. I stood in the middle. I was above the fray even then.

The others thought nursery was a drag. Nursery made them get up early, and when at last they were fully awake, around noon, nursery put them to bed. But all my memories of nursery are good. Dancing, putting on shows for parents, Santa Claus bearing gifts, and Luke.

But back to running. It’s important to warm up properly. To do some stretches. Your muscles need to know you’re expecting something of them. Ask any expert, they all recommend stretching.

Textina: *(Enters the stage and stands to attention.)*

Simona: Let’s begin by stretching our calf muscles. Hold your hands out in front and place them against something solid. *(Textina runs to Simona and turns sideways to the audience.)* Something you can trust. Like a wall or a conveyor of SMS text messages. *(Textina gives the thumbs-up sign.)* We begin with both feet in basic position. Then we take a step back and flex the other leg, while pushing forward with both arms. Both heels must be on the ground. This stretches the calf muscles and the Achilles tendon.

Having worked the one leg, change to the other. Proficiency in this exercise comes in handy when exiting crowded public transport. *(She demonstrates the force with which the arms should push.)*

The second exercise stretches the muscles at the front of the thighs. Again from basic position. *(She demonstrates, as does Textina.)* Place one leg back and take hold of the instep from the bottom of the foot. Then press the heel to your backside. This gets the guys staring, I know. The knee must be pointing straight down. If the heel is properly tight, you'll feel the muscle at the front stretching. Be warned, though – don't try it with both legs at once.

Textina: *(Enters.)* Beep. I hope you're coming on Sunday. Mum

Simona: *(Looks at her phone.)* Sorry, but I'm really going to have to answer this. If I don't, she won't stop. *(She writes a reply, which Textina reads before leaving the stage. Simona puts the phone away.)*

Don't get to thinking that Mum and I have a good relationship. My mum is the essence of motherhood. If she could live my life for me, she would. Sometimes I think she does. She gives counsel in every situation, and she always knows best. The usual store of great advice will be waiting for me at home on Sunday, I'm sure. But not all that glitters there is gold, as you can imagine. My relationship with Mum is a bit one-sided. For all her advice, she's not very good at listening.

Otherwise she's pretty much okay. Actually, though, my father has had a much bigger influence on me. His way of bringing me up was like I had this imaginary sister, and he was speaking to her, while I just happened to catch what he said. I appreciated the indirectness. Dad's just great like that. There are loads of things he fails to understand about me, but he fails to understand them with charm and grace. If he wasn't what he is, he'd probably be a philosopher.

Let me give you an example. Mum can go on at me for weeks to no effect. But Dad can change my life with a few well-chosen words. When I was little, he said to me once, quite out of the blue, his face all serious: "Remember, Simmy – girls don't cry." Only later did I realize he'd been winding me up. But by then the work had been done. I made up my mind that I would never cry.

Textina: *(Enters. Performs two chest flies and a squat before standing to attention with her eyes on Simona.)*

Simona: Where were we? Oh yes, stretching. Well, although the legs are the main thing when we run, we must stretch the whole body. What if we end up on all fours! So we should discuss stretching the pectoral muscles, too. Raise one arm to shoulder height and hold on to something, lightly. *(She places one hand on Textina and leans against her.)* Then turn the upper body, with the shoulder of the leaning arm to the front. And the shoulder of the other arm to the back, of course. Hold steady, pushing lightly. No swinging. Then change arms and repeat.

The next thing to stretch is the triceps. *(She demonstrates, as does Textina.)* Raise your right arm and touch the left shoulder blade. *(To the audience, loud.)* Your own left shoulder blade! That's it! From above, hold the right elbow in the left hand and push it towards the shoulder blade. I should point out that it also works the other way round. Left on right and push. Keep your head up. Careful not to fall forward, ladies.

A very important observation to end on. There's a fine line between doing it right and showing off. Showing off is cute when you're really little. At nursery, for instance. But all good things must come to an end. I'm sure I'm not the only one to have passed out of nursery with flying colours. Ready to move to the next level.

Textina: *(Shakes Simona's hand in congratulation.)*

Simona: Thanks. At primary school, Luke and I were in the same class, which was great. As old pals, we shared a desk. I sat on the right, because I'm a right-hander. He's a leftie, so he sat on the left. This made it easier for us to copy from each other.

Right from Year One, I was known as a swot. Many swots are unpopular, the butt of jokes, teasing and pranks. I was no exception. But I took a philosophical view of things. For me, being a swot meant knowing my aims, even then.

Textina: *(Taps herself on the shoulder.)*

Simona: The truth is, in those days learning came easy to me. It wasn't all plain sailing, though. Like the time I got my one and only official reprimand from the head, thanks to our English teacher. No disciple of Shakespeare, that woman – she was about one lesson ahead of us. As I took private English lessons too, I knew a fair bit

more than she did. One day, I pointed this out. In English. That wasn't so bad. But after I translated my words into her native tongue for her, it was far worse. Before I knew what was happening, I was in the head's office.

But this taught me a valuable lesson. That criticizing those in power is against the rules. That not only does truth not always win, it can burn those who use it. Joan of Arc could tell you a thing or two about that. Luckily for me, I got away with a clip on the ear from my dad.

Textina: *(Frowns and rubs her ear.)*

Simona: That wasn't my first clip on the ear, nor my last. Our class teacher was forever lashing out. Whether all those slaps were meant for me, I'll never know. Our class teacher had a dreadful squint, you see. She'd shout, "What do you think *you're* doing?", and kids in the classroom next door would freak out. If she'd joined the police, she could have monitored the traffic going both ways. I'm not complaining, though. I was pretty cheeky for my age, and I accepted those slaps with pride. And you can bet that I never cried.

Textina: *(Nods vigorously to show that she could prove it.)*

Simona: I'm told that these days hitting pupils is against the law. Haven't they got better things to fret about in Brussels? I'm with those old-school talking heads you see on TV sometimes. The ones who gave up teaching to go into show business. As far as I'm concerned, only two teaching methods work on pupils every time – corporal punishment and intimidation.

Where my duty to sport is concerned, I have no favourites. I take no prisoners. *(Points at the audience.)* You in the third row, stop laughing! You in the fourth row, remove those ass's ears! *(Puts up two fingers against the back of Textina's head.)* That's just childish.

You should stay on the right side of me, my friends. *(She makes a sweeping hand motion, as if slapping someone.)* Anyway, let's change the subject. To running shoes.

Running shoes must be comfortable but sturdy. They're your connecting point with your surroundings. When choosing shoes, there are many things to consider. Your height, your weight, and whether you are bow-legged or knock-kneed, for instance. Another

thing to consider is where you wish to run in them. On the road? In the woods? Only fools think they can get by with a single pair of all-purpose shoes. Don't scrimp and save on footwear. A word of advice: it's best not to buy shoes in the afternoon or evening, when your feet are worn down. Don't stick to one brand, play the market. And ladies – the colour of our shoes is the last thing on our minds. You may be able to suffer through a wedding in shoes a size too small, but you won't get through a half-marathon like that.

Run naked if you must, but never barefoot. Well, maybe from bedroom to bathroom with a brief stopover at the fridge, then straight back to bed. Anyway, I guarantee that running will change your life. Just as it has mine. Paradoxically, text messaging has changed my life even more.

Textina: *(Points at herself and smiles proudly.)*

Simona: Paradoxically because it saves me a lot of running about. But life itself is a paradox, is it not?

My parents gave me my first mobile phone when I was eleven. I know they meant it as a kind of watchdog, but I fell in love with it straight away. It was physical. I could touch it intimately. I could talk to it, and it would talk back. I'd never known anything like it. I even slept with it under my pillow. When it needed charging, I always plugged it in where I could see it. But the function that truly won my heart was the text messaging service.

Textina: *(Wears a self-satisfied smile as she bounces on her tiptoes.)*

Simona: I can live without water for two or three days, without food for fifty, sixty at a push. But without text messaging I can manage for no more than eight hours. And that's when I'm asleep.

*(Simona takes out her mobile and taps at its keys. Textina runs up to her.)*

So I got my first mobile, and before I knew it I was writing short messages all the time, to everyone I knew.

Textina: *(Runs like crazy from pillar to post, always stopping next to Simona before scooting away with the next message. Simona writes and writes.)*

Simona: All...the...time. I felt like I was in a trance. It was amazing!

Textina: *(Obviously running out of breath. Her tongue is hanging out, she is wringing her hands, etc.)*

Simona: I never left off. My thumbs were always at it. I tapped in texts any spare moment I had.

Textina: *(Still running.)*

Simona: *(Stops writing.)* Until my mum put a stop to it.

Textina: *(Falls to the ground exhausted.)*

Simona: Because of the bill I was running up, or because Mum was struggling to delete all my messages, I got grounded. After that, I had no choice but to open complex bilateral negotiations at the highest level. I talked myself into a monthly quota. It was a restriction, but it made me appreciate what I had. I took more time and trouble over my texts. I made them weightier and information-packed.

I sent texts to Luke too, of course. His parents had mobiled him up at the same time mine had me. He replied to about one in twenty. I didn't mind – everyone knows boys don't like to show their feelings. He went for quality over quantity. I got my first poem from him in a text. I still have it.

Textina: *(To the audience.)* Beep. See you at the pictures tomorrow? Without your love, I'm filled with sorrow. Luke

Simona: I'm not sure that I actually went. Probably not, because they let us out of after-school care together at three. But you must admit it was lovely of him.

I love text messaging so much! And when no one writes or replies to you, you can always send a message to yourself.

*(As Simona taps at the keys, Textina looks over her shoulder before walking in a circle and coming back to Simona.)*

Textina: Beep. You're the best! *(She leaves.)*

Simona: I know. *(She smiles.)* So, we've talked about shoes. Now a few words about clothes. It's true to say that on today's market there are many kinds of runwear to choose from. So many, in fact, that

we could spend five seminars on them, and put on ten fashion shows. All I have to say on the matter is that you should choose your clothing to go with the weather. You don't want to boil in summer and freeze in winter. If you do, things might end very badly for you. Your clothing must be comfortable. There's nothing worse than runwear that cuts into you. It's best to wear light-coloured clothing with reflective strips on it, to be well seen. Imagine that you're running in the woods and you get hit by a bike ridden by a crazed mushroom-forager. Choose fabrics that breathe, because believe me, you're going to do an awful lot of sweating. When your run is over, put your runwear on a hanger to dry. This will stop it going mouldy. The importance of what you wear should not be underestimated – in sport as in life.

Clothes maketh the man. Shakespeare said that. Clothes maketh the woman, too – as my dad likes to say. He's full of pearls of wisdom like that. There are three steps to Heaven, I once heard him say, when he thought I wasn't listening. Step One: Buy a woman a dress. Step Two: Praise it to the skies. Step Three: Help her out of it. Thinking your child isn't listening – that's a classic parent's mistake. Kids hear everything. Then they say something that really takes you by surprise. Luke once praised my mum's cocoa by saying it was as sweet as a virgin's titty.

Textina: *(Giggles with embarrassment.)*

Simona: I'm reminded of Luke's first attempt at erotic contact. We were on this stupid scavenger hunt in the woods, pretending to have a good time to keep the teachers quiet. Suddenly we realized there was no one anywhere near us. Which was just what he was waiting for. Was my heart beating as fast as his? he wanted to know. Then he put his hand on my right breast. I was so startled, I took three steps back. I really did see his heart thumping in his chest. And don't even ask where it was pumping the blood to.

Textina: *(Lowers her eyes, paws the ground with her foot, pretending disinterest.)*

Simona: I said nothing. We ran on. I was praying that the blush had left my ears. And I was worried he might have left a dirty mark on the front of my T-shirt.

There was an erotic charge to it, but back then I wasn't ready to feel it. The fact is, through much of primary school I was in this strange state of mind where I couldn't decide if I was going to be a

girl or a boy. Things became clearer to me in Years Eight and Nine, although the evidence was physical only. Maybe I wanted to put the whole business out of my head. By then, we'd picked up quite a lot in biology lessons. And our teacher of sex education was so open about things, she would have made Cynthia Payne blush.

Textina: *(Nods vigorously.)*

Simona: Primary school didn't have much influence on my life. It taught me to read, write and tell the truth when it worked in my favour. I learned some other more or less useful bits and bobs, many of which I've forgotten and some of which I enriched with further study, only to forget them later. In the field of sex, I stuck to the letter of the law – although I wasn't sure what that was. Before our class passed out of primary school, we gathered in the gym and made speeches. I thanked everyone, then said I was glad I would never see any of them again. You can bet that speech lives on at that school.

I was honest and open and about to become a rebel at secondary school. Unlike Luke, I sailed through the entrance exam to the grammar. Luke got in only because his father made a convincing case for him.

Textina: *(By hand gesture, she shows that this didn't come cheap.)*

Simona: Even so, Luke and I were split up for the first time. I went into the A stream and he went into the B. This caused even great chaos in my confused mind. Around then, I finally made up my mind that I was a girl and would remain one. I was starting to get weird feelings around boys. Boys were the same boorish loons they had always been, but now I was attracted to them. I knew now that men and women were different because my feelings, not just the biology textbook, told me so. To my surprise, something similar was going on with Luke. And I had a pressing need to get to the bottom of it.

Luke is... How should I put it? An alpha male.

Textina: *(Assumes a bodybuilder's pose.)*

Simona: The kind of male that shows his true nature only when undressed.

Textina: *(Shrugs.)*

Simona: The kind that speaks and scratches his head in rapid succession.

Textina: *(Scratches her head.)*

Simona: The kind whose heart is reached through his belly.

Textina: *(Sits on her haunches, hands on the ground before her, tongue hanging out like a dog's.)*

Simona: Good boy. Of course I'll bring you a doggy treat! *(Scratches Textina behind the ear.)* The male likes a good scratch. Plus, he likes lots of attention and to be reminded that he's leader of the pack.

Textina: *(Stands up and claps to show agreement.)*

Simona: The male is ever so vain. He needs to be looked up to, admired – on the face of things at least. Then he'll do whatever you ask of him.

Textina: *(Signs her name in the air in capitals.)*

Simona: I'd have signed up to that too. The thing was, if I was getting attracted to Luke, who I'd known since nursery school, then other females would be getting attracted to him as well. Which meant I was feeling something else I'd never felt before. Besides, as we were in different classes, I had to keep reminding him I was there.

Textina: *(Points to Simona's phone and to herself, telling Simona to call him.)*

Simona: On starting at grammar school, I embarked on an important period in my development, as it goes. You might say that my hormones kicked in.

New surroundings, new classmates, new teachers, and then the hormones. It was time for me to make a stand. So I became a rebel. I may have left my swot days behind me, but I was still towards the top of the class. Okay, I couldn't bear the thought of a teacher finding me wanting, but I rebelled a lot outside the classroom, especially at home. When I was supposed to do the vacuuming, I would take out the rubbish. When I was supposed to put out the bins, I would wash the dishes. When I was allowed to watch telly, I would do the vacuuming. I was pretty difficult to live with, really.

So what about you? Isn't wanting to run a half-marathon a kind of rebellion? Mischief-making to say the least? This brings us smoothly to the question of motivation. Running for one's health is a good thing. Running up bills is bad. Running after girls can be costly, while running after boys is just... (*Waves a dismissive hand.*) Running for a bus, too, is a no-no. The next boy and the next bus will be along within five minutes.

Textina: (*Runs on the spot.*)

Simona: What did I want to say? Oh yes, on the subject of marathons, there's an interesting legend about a runner called Pheidippides, who was at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC. When the fighting was over, it's said that Pheidippides was sent dashing over to Athens with news of the victory of the Athenians over the Persians, a distance of about twenty-four miles. He delivered his message – "We won!" – then dropped down dead of exhaustion, so completing his assignment. From what I've just said, we can assume that a half-marathon came after a smaller battle. My task is to ensure that having reached the finish line and yelled "I made it! I made it!", you cling to life without need of resuscitation. You've probably seen it on *House* or *Chicago Hope* – someone holding electrodes (*she kneels to Textina, who is lying down, and demonstrates*), shouting, "The heart's stopped beating. Nurse, the defibrillator, and be quick about it! Charge! Step back! Smack!" (*Textina plays being hit by electric current.*) "No pulse! Again! Charge! Smack!"

This may look like fun, but be assured that when you're truly in limbo and your loved ones are apoplectic, it's no fun at all. The motivation to run must be backed up by intense preparation. I rest my case.

Motivation is a good thing in life, too. When Luke shared a school desk with me, life was good. But then he didn't. He was in the next room, surrounded by girls. And ours was a year group without many boys in it, so there were many more girls than boys. I couldn't tell him the answers, I couldn't give him my break-time snack, and it was still too early for sex. All I could do was let myself be touched – quite a popular tactic in the first year of grammar school.

Anyway, I sent him a text message suggesting an assignation at the freight yard.

Textina: *(Speaks to Simona.)* Beep. See you there. Luke

Simona: The truth is, after I started at grammar school, I blossomed. I stopped giggling so much, and I impressed Luke by returning the elastic from his underpants – a trophy I'd had since nursery.

I made sure I was well prepared by removing my bra before I got to the yard. We climbed into some bushes and talked about everything and nothing, slagging off teachers and the like. We sent smiley-face texts back and forth even though we were next to each other. Finally, I laid aside my shyness and my T-shirt, explaining that I was working on a tan. I left the rest to him. His hands were very hot, I remember. I don't know if he remembered any of it afterwards, because he didn't recover full consciousness until we were almost home. I felt pretty embarrassed by the whole afternoon. I don't know what boys get out of fondling a girl's lungs. What I do know is that that day I had no desire to fondle anything of his. And I had no idea whether my mission was accomplished. Would he now stop ogling the girls in his class, or would he want to touch *them* too?

But I was sure that I wanted Luke, so that night I sent him a text to press my case. *(She taps at the keys and Textina reads the message.)*

Textina: *(Calls to backstage.)* Beep. Nighty-night, Butch. Simmy

Simona: There was no reply. *(She looks hard at Textina.)*

Textina: *(Shakes her head.)*

Simona: It was obvious that this wouldn't be enough. The whole thing needed more depth. There would have to be a spiritual element as well as a physical one. My first chance to give this a try came right after the summer holidays. In after-school dance class. I missed after-school dance class in first grade by choice – pink crinolines and high heels offended the rebel in me. Now it occurred to me that I could act rebellious in dance class, too. Because I like movement, and that's what dancing is. But mainly I went because of Luke. Luke had been to dance class in first grade, but his gift for movement and perfect tone-deafness meant he was allowed to repeat it. So he and I were in it together.

Dance class is a little world of its own. It forces you into unforced

conversation. As you know, the subject of the weather will only get you so far, and only idiots talk about school all the time. I intended to impress the young men by sharing with them what I knew about Formula One.

I described a whole racing car in every detail. Basically, I built it. I even mentioned some technical particularities. All this in the space of a minute and a half.

I stuck to this topic in the first two classes. Meanwhile, my male partners described to me the history of Blenheim Palace, the collected works of the rock band Judas Priest, every last mystery of the Pyramids of Egypt, and the extraordinarily interesting life cycle of the seven-spot ladybird. One show-off knitted me a virtual sweater with a Finnish pattern. What a bunch of nutcases!

But most of all – three times at least – I danced with Luke. If danced is the right word for what we did. In the process, I tried to talk myself into his head, so that he wouldn't forget about me. And it worked. He wrote me a second poem. The first, if you remember, went: "See you at the pictures tomorrow? Without your love, I'm filled with sorrow." This one was longer, but it arrived by text as well.

Textina: Beep. (*Recites.*)

Red dandelions  
Blue grass  
Green sky  
Yellow day  
Orange dreams are here to stay

Water that smells of earth  
Earth that smells of hay  
Hay that smells of memories  
Of two lovers at play

(*Textina, plainly moved, gives the thumbs-up sign.*)

Simona: Isn't it just divine? The romance of it! Orange dreams are here to stay. And I'm not even a Buddhist.

Admittedly the fact that he also sent the poem to Helen, Janet, Denise, Sandra and Christine took some wind out of my sails. By then, I'd stopped actually sticking my tongue out at things I didn't

like, but I still did it in my head. So I did it at Luke three times. (*She demonstrates.*) It makes me look like a viper, without the wiggly line on its back. But he got such a dirty look from me that he must have felt crushed. Anyway, all's well that ends well. I checked all the girls' phones in the changing rooms before PE class. Judging by the dates and times of Luke's messages, he sent the poem to me first. Which is the most important thing. Artist that he was, evidently he needed to sell his work to a wider circle of consumers. So all was forgiven.

I had the feeling the dance class was bringing Luke and me closer than the grope in the bushes had done. I achieved another little success, too. To meet the demanding standards of PE class, he needed to get in better shape. So he and I started running together.

Textina: (*Jogs on the spot, next to Simona.*)

Simona: Back to running, then. Let's discuss attitude. Attitude of the limbs and body, not to life in general. Your running style must be smooth, dynamic, pleasing and elegant. Think of yourself as a human spring. (*Jogs on the spot to demonstrate.*) The upper body is erect, leaning forward only slightly. Imagine you're running against a strong headwind. Eyes straight ahead. When running, under no circumstances search the ground for small change. Chin up. (*Points into the audience.*) You there! Both chins! Shoulders relaxed. Arms in fluent motion, elbows at right angles – the left elbow too. Hands open – no pressing the thumbs to the palm. The stride should be fluent, steps not too long, always the same, to the point of monotony. Each step like the next and the one after that, all the way to the finish. These strict rules apply to all. They do say, however, that all theory is grey, but forever green is the tree of life. We find our own style only with practice. The most important thing here is enjoyment. To close with, the proverbial cherry on the cake. What's the right way to hold the winner's cup? (*Raises her hands above her head.*) As high as you can, so that the others can see it.

Though my runs with Luke went well, they lacked romance. Not that running in nature's bosom isn't romantic, but the fact that he insisted on running behind me, his eyes on my backside, began to get me down after a while. I proposed a candlelit dinner. Having at first resisted the idea, eventually he gave in and we went to a restaurant together. The occasion was a bit of a cringe, to be honest. There was no sign of romance; in fact, he was plainly bored. At the end, he paid only for what he'd had himself. So

either our relationship was in crisis, or we had no relationship at all. Though we did continue to run together.

Textina: *(Holds up a hand with fingers crossed. She hasn't given up on them.)*

Simona: How I love running! I always have. Forrest Gump knocked my self-confidence for a time *(taps her head to show that Forrest Gump is touched)*, but I stuck with it. That's why I'm here with you today. Your great aim is to run a half-marathon. My aim is to ensure that you don't need a wheelchair after you do. It's all in the preparation, you see.

Ankle-work is crucial. When the ankles are working properly, the impact of the foot is softer and the bounce greater. You can practise by running on the spot. *(She runs on the spot. Textina is behind her, doing the same.)* It should become automatic. Think of your ankles only in training; during the half-marathon itself, it's too late for that – you've all kinds of other things to worry about then. Think of your victory before you think of your will and testament. As I believe I've said already, running is about having fun above all.

It was my mum who started me off on running. In her youth, she was a runner herself. A competitive hurdler, in fact. An ability to get over obstacles comes in handy in married life. As I said, she's pretty good, my mum.

Textina: *(Shakes her head in disbelief.)*

Simona: She is though! I'm not saying she doesn't have her quirks. Plus, the mother-daughter relationship isn't always the easiest. I know she would lay down her life for me, and I'd do whatever she asked of me. What we have trouble with is ordinary, everyday communication. Under the same roof, a mother and daughter will compete. In the enclosed space of the household, there's room for one woman's opinion only. We talk, of course we do. But the words seem to go in one ear and out the other. Let me show you what I mean. I'll write Mum a text. *(Taps in a message with Textina looking on over her shoulder.)*

Textina: *(Walks to the edge of the stage and stands by the wall.)*

Simona: *(Watching Textina.)* See? It's like talking to the wall.

Textina: *(Waves a hand in resignation and walks away.)*

Simona: Conversations with Mum used to really take it out of me. But that was before I realized there's a lot of that in life. It turned out that there are many fewer people who want to listen to you than there are people who want to talk at you.

I learned a lot on my first part-time job, in a classic-style pub-cum-restaurant. To remember who had ordered what, and who was sitting where, was a real battle for me, with disaster always a heartbeat away. Factor in that the chef wasn't the quickest and not every meal looked like it sounded. Knight's this, devil's that, miller's the other. When will they come up with IT specialist's pocket and gynaecologist's apron, I wonder? If only, I thought, every meal could be called 'mystery dish'! Anyway, it didn't seem to matter much who got what. The surprise was the main thing.

It was an eye-opening experience, I can tell you. Hardly the kind of idyll that school had prepared me for. As a waitress, I was expected to get things right and behave in a professional manner. I learned on the job. No one made allowances for me, men least of all. I'd noticed men looking at me before, but here they gawped at me. Rather like you're doing now. *(She points into the audience.)* But at least you're not saying anything. There was no getting away from the stares. And every bloke was capable of producing an incredible number of double and triple entendres at a single sitting. It was worst when there were several such alpha males at one table, making out they were talking to each other, when everything they said was meant for me to hear. By the time I'd set down everyone's beer, I was blushing to the roots of my hair. Only now did I begin to appreciate the school of Mum. How I wished they could talk and talk and all the talk would go in one ear and out the other. The realization of how tough it is to earn your own money hit me hard. So I turned to running and text-messaging to work off the stress.

Textina: *(Enters as if in slow motion. Simona watches her with interest.)*

Simona: There must be quite a lot of us who text-message all the time. Sometimes the network gets backed up.

Textina: *(Falls to her knees.)*

Simona: Sometimes it just conks out.

*(To the audience.)* She's had enough. But a high level of fitness is a must, particularly in a runner. For this reason, it's good to do exercises that are good for the muscles but which you won't replicate while actually running. The high knee thrust is a case in point. When running on the spot, raise your knee as high as it will go. *(She demonstrates.)* Your muscles should be unsurprising. Don't be like the runner who rested his foot on a high railing to tie a shoelace and couldn't get it down again. It's good to try extreme positions in training, when there's time for them.

Because time is a bugger, you know. As soon as Luke's running was up to standard, he stopped running with me. I carried on running on his behalf, of course. Anyway, Luke and I finally went our separate ways for university. He went to the school of economics, I went to the faculty of sports science. We saw ever less of each other, which was a problem. I decided to approach the problem rationally and methodically. You're right to shake your head. Logic and love are not a good combination. Luke and I would go together to the concert of one of his favourite bands, I decided. The Three Sisters, I think they're called. Maybe the Four Sisters. No matter. The main thing was, we would be in each other's company for three hours on the way there, then while we were waiting for the concert to start, then while the concert was in progress, and then for the three-hour journey home. I carefully prepared topics for us to discuss, including specific questions I wished to ask. I committed all this to memory. I was hoping that this long conversation would establish consensus between us, and that our souls would merge. The results were catastrophic. I waited for him in vain at the bus. He didn't even turn up at the concert. I sent him a text as soon as I realized he was a no-show.

Textina: *(Reading the text, she sets out into the auditorium, where she wanders among the spectators, repeatedly shrugging her shoulders.)*

Simona: And of all text messages to get lost, it had to be this one! It was enough to make one weep! I spent the day answering my painstakingly prepared questions. As you can imagine, these answers can't go out before the evening watershed. If by some chance they did, the law would be down on me like a ton of bricks.

To tell the truth, things with Luke were really starting to get me down. Our relationship had been through every possible phase. We'd done conscious, subconscious and unconscious, and still no climax. I had all these crazy thoughts. That I'd jump off a bridge,

for instance. But if I did, I'd probably break my leg. Or both legs. I gave some serious thought to voodoo. Do you know voodoo? I'd make a doll of Luke and stick pins in it. Or I'd stick the pins in my mobile, then send him a text. I'm not hysterical in the least (*she shrieks*), but this was too much even for me!

Textina: *(Shushes Simona by putting a finger to her lips.)*

Simona: I got over it in the end. But have you noticed that mistakes have a habit of piling up? My second mistake was getting him drunk at a party, so that I could seduce him. No romance, no chit-chat. I was biologically mature, theoretically prepared, and I had the protection in hand. I didn't know which condoms Luke preferred, so I bought five different sorts, a cross-section of the market. There remained one small technical problem. In those days, my friends and I did an awful lot of sport. Some of us were top athletes. So you can imagine the parties we had – they were anything but wild. There wasn't much alcohol about. Everyone had a strict training plan and a strict trainer watching his back. Or her backside. Still, at one of our get-togethers I managed to get Luke slightly tipsy. He became sweeter, more obliging and more responsive. Then he made a loving grab for me. We ended up in bed together. For the first time. He was mine. All night long.

He left me in the morning with these words: "What are you on about? I was drunk." I was beginning to suspect that he didn't care for me. The whole world seemed to have it in for me. I decided to confront Luke face to face by writing him a biting text.

Textina: *(Runs to Simona.)*

Simona: But I just couldn't find the right words.

Textina: *(Walks away from Simona.)*

Simona: But why should I choose my words carefully? I'd just write what came to my mind. To my thumb, I mean. There are times when a woman must tough things out.

Textina: *(Runs back to Simona.)*

Simona: Then again, not even the fastest horse can catch a word spoken in anger. Sometimes it really is necessary to consider your words carefully.

Textina: *(Walks away again.)*

Simona: On the other hand, time and tide wait for no man. I needed to be mistress of the situation. No slouching!

Textina: *(Waves a dismissive hand, sits down, takes out a snack and begins to eat.)*

Simona: The thing is, though, Luke is such a sensitive soul. I was afraid to blow it.

Textina: *(As she eats, she makes a hand motion to suggest Simona has a screw loose.)*

Simona: In the end, I decided to leave things alone. Fortunately, I still had my running. When it all got too much for me, I could always run it off.

So, friends, our next extreme exercise is kicking. As we run on the spot, we try to touch our buttocks with our heels. That's right, we wish to kick ourselves. A kicking is something most of us deserve, I reckon. *(She demonstrates; meanwhile, Textina plays the clown.)* We bounce on our tiptoes. With our elbows at right angles. Not forgetting to move our arms backwards and forwards. No slacking!

*(Stops running.)* It's sometimes said of me that I'm a hard taskmaster. That I'm authoritarian and dictatorial. But that's not true. All I want is for people to do what I want them to do. And woe betide those who don't!

Textina: *(Shows that she agrees by a blatant gesture.)*

Simona: It's different in real life, though. You can run away from a problem, but you can't run away from yourself. Some may say that Luke is the one who should feel taken advantage of. So why did I feel that way? Because I love him, and it's his duty to understand that and make the necessary sacrifices.

At that time, I made another big decision. I would become a feminist. A particularly ardent one. *(She writes a text message.)*

Textina: *(Runs up to Simona and reads the message.)*

Simona: Freedom! Equality! Sisterhood! These are our watchwords.

Textina: Beep. Of foes we have no fear. Of men we have no need.

Simona: Indeed! We want justice. In the past, boys did military service and girls gave birth. Compulsory military service has been cancelled. So what about girls and their duty? Parliament is silent on the subject.

Textina: *(Nods keenly.)*

Simona: We women are forever being humiliated. Take mud-wrestling, for instance. Two practically naked girls fighting each other in the goo for the enjoyment of men. It's disgraceful! We feminists think that all mud-wrestling matches should take place without spectators.

Textina: *(Holds aloft a clenched fist.)*

Simona: We consider the situation in public transport intolerable, too. The practice of seated men and standing women must one day come to an end. We insist on fundamental adjustments to public transportation regulations. Not only should men be forbidden to sit in trams and buses, in the presence of women they should be made to kneel.

Textina: *(Claps her hands.)*

Simona: And there's something else we see as a fundamental problem – the hitherto overlooked fact that the world of men objectifies women. The man of property sees the woman as nothing but a token of his wealth. The man of no property sees the woman as a cooker and washing machine. This must end! We must put an end to stereotyping!

Textina: *(Nods. Gestures to the people to join her in expressing agreement.)*

Simona: And another thing. When a guy has lots of girls, people think, "What a great guy!" When a girl has lots of guys, they think of her as loose to say the least. This is an injustice we refuse to accept. We feminists believe that the era of man as stud and woman as cow must end right now. *(She taps in a text message.)*

Textina: *(Reads the message out to the audience.)* Beep. Man up, sisters!

Simona: Feminists of the world, unite!

Feminist ideas took me over. I decided I would wear dark glasses,

fatigues and combat boots, and that I wouldn't shave my legs.

Textina: *(Makes a gesture to show she doubts this is enough.)*

Simona: Okay. That I would shave no part of my body.

Textina: *(Nods to show her satisfaction.)*

Simona: But then, friends, I caught sight of myself in my military get-up in a mirror, and my radical feminism left me at the speed of a gleaming Ferrari in a hurry.

Luke had upset me, that's for sure. But why should all men pay for what he had done alone? So I gave feminism the push.

Textina: *(Waves a hand in resignation and walks away.)*

Simona: That some guys objectify women still gets me down, to be honest. But I realized that feminism isn't the easiest way for me to get what I want. I decided to become a gold-digger instead. I would marry a billionaire and set about making him a millionaire. But wouldn't that be selling myself? I rummaged around in my thoughts for a while and realized that I didn't have a gold-digger in me. I didn't want to live as an object of his choosing surrounded by objects of my choosing. Anyway, can you imagine a billionaire who writes poems? I can't. I'm rambling now, aren't I? My brain must be low on oxygen. Running's the answer for that.

*(Simona runs around the stage, Textina behind her, trying to keep up.)*

Now for a few words on food. Every athlete needs a healthy, varied diet. White rice, rolled oats, fruit, soya, vegetables, bean sprouts, muesli... *(Shouts into the audience.)* Whoever just said 'yuck' should know that I can come in and sort you out. As I was saying, eat regular meals, my friends. Don't gulp your food, and don't talk with your mouth full. Sweets and cakes are the stuff of dreams only. Think of the display in the window of a confectioner's. Imagine yourself standing there with your nose pressed against the glass. *(Rests her palms and nose against an imaginary shop window.)* You are eating what you see with your eyes. Because – guess what? – it's after closing time. But the most important thing to remember is: Don't eat before a race. Be aware that if you eat roast duck, sauerkraut and dumplings before embarking on a half-marathon, you will have to carry them to the

finish line. In the best case, obviously.

Luke loves roast duck. I don't get it. Where am I going wrong? Do those around me not understand me? They say fathers worry about their daughters. With me, my mother did most of the worrying. She worried about what I would get up to next. Sometimes she lost track of what she was warning me against. I realize that mistakes are inevitable. But where the hell did I go wrong with Luke? Why doesn't he feel what I feel? Why doesn't he want me, when I give him so much? Ugh, that sounds weird! But I've put so much into that relationship. I expend so much energy on it. I'm literally overflowing with positive feelings about it. I've begun to feel this enormous need to be loved.

Textina: *(Goes weak at the knees, a dreamy smile on her face.)*

Simona: Don't get me wrong. It's not that no one has expressed an interest in me. In my tight leotard, all I have to do is bend over like this *(She leans forward...)* and this *(... and back)*. I get loads of offers at the gym, for instance. Most are invitations to coffee, although I get the occasional offer of a quickie on the trampolines. Once, a brain-dead bodybuilder-on-steroids invited me for a drive. He had a big gold chain around his neck and was leaning against a huge off-roader. God knows how he even got that thing through the gates. "Hey, hot stuff!" he said. "Fancy a trip?" By sticking my tongue out at a guy like that, I'm showing more than I want him to see.

Not all men are like that, though. There are smarter, shrewder men who sense the sensitive girl under the tough exterior. The girl with a fondness for poetry and flowers. Men whose smooth words are lilting music to the tender female soul.

Textina: *(Dances to Swan Lake, ballerina-style.)*

Simona: Men whose perfect boyish smiles and open-hearted ways play on my innermost feelings until I'm won over. At which point the men disappear, of course.

Sad to say, it's a proven fact that men are interested only in the one thing.

Textina: *(Nods.)*

Simona: And there's nothing of the spirit in that thing. Nor an ounce of

romance. No adventure. No convergence of souls. No wine and roses... Perhaps for that very reason I had a sudden, huge yearning for something real. Something a little dangerous. Something forbidden. So I got involved with a married man. Yes, I did. But I'm not proud of it.

They say that in many ways the mistress is better off than the wife. She gets the best of the man – his favour and his compliments, a lovely gift now and then. All without having to wash his socks and shirts. It's a comfortable arrangement. But for the text messaging.

- Textina: *(Tiptoes to Simona and whispers.)* Beep. Hi lover. We can meet tomorrow. 90 minutes later than our last rendezvous. 250 yards northwest of the rendezvous point of our 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting in May. How about it, sweet chops?
- Simona: *(Taps in a text.)* OK. XXX. XL XL XL.
- Textina: *(Tiptoes to the wings and says in a whisper.)* Beep. OK. XXX. XL XL XL.
- Simona: Not forgetting to delete it straight away, of course. *(Deletes text message.)*
- Textina: *(Grimaces.)* Ow! Ow! Ow!
- Simona: A necessary precaution. I'm sure the men among you know what I'm talking about. Don't you? Yes, I see one of you smiling. But why are the women among you laughing? Deny, deny, deny, the experts on marriage used to tell us. Now they tell us, delete, delete, delete.
- Textina: *(Rotates a finger near her temple to indicate a screw loose.)*
- Simona: My career as a mistress got off to a promising start. At first, I felt great about getting my revenge on Luke, and I couldn't understand why he didn't mind. Then it dawned on me that he didn't know what I was doing. So I put Luke out of my mind. I felt cherished. When he was with me, it was for me and me only. He paid me thousands of compliments and praised me to the skies. I was the centre of his universe. He was the dominant one, yet he was in my power. Then I made the fatal mistake of falling for the illusion. Yes, I fell in love.

The first time your lover tells you his wife doesn't understand him,

you act amused. Is there any greater cliché? Once you've heard it a hundred times, though, you start planning a future with him. You find yourself at a crossroads. One way leads to his divorcing his wife, then marrying you, the other to him changing his mistress. Mine chose the worst possible way to break us up. Some guys level with you when things are over, once they've got what they wanted. In the meadow of love, a poet moves from flower to flower. I understand that. But there are those who pin the blame for the break-up on you, and do you harm in the process. His wife couldn't find small gold items of largely sentimental value that had belonged to parents and grandparents, my lover claimed. I wasn't under suspicion, of course I wasn't. Well, that was it for me. I told him exactly what I thought of his wife's losses, and I left, slamming the door behind me. Which was exactly what he wanted. How great he must have felt to be rid of me before it was too late! No one wants a hysterical mistress, do they?

Textina: *(Gestures to show that he deserves his throat cut.)*

Simona: It quite threw me off balance. I struggled with what had happened for a whole month, wavering from wanting to die to wanting to get fat. After that, I knew that being a mistress wasn't for me. Plus, I had come to the conviction that things would have been worse if he'd started cheating on me. That would have made me a mistress past her expiry date.

Textina: *(Makes the cut-throat gesture twice.)*

Simona: It was then that for the first and last time I gave serious consideration to an admirer of mine called Chester. What a cross to bear in life, a name like that! Anyway, Chester made himself the president and sole member of my fan club. He makes a play for me every now and then. Quite a handsome, clever guy is Chester. And he's very, very patient. He thinks that if he waits long enough, I'll come to him. I admit that he's a decent guy, but he's a bit wet. I tell him to sit and wait and he sits and waits. He doesn't have any get-up-and-go, to put it mildly. I can't imagine spending the rest of my life at half-speed with Chester.

Textina: *(Gives a hesitant nod; she can't imagine it either.)*

Simona: When things are at their worst, there are always girlfriends. To chew the fat, natter, jabber, jaw and exchange wise words with, till we're blue in the face. I've no problem with that. *(Simona and Textina each put an arm around the other's shoulders.)* So we girls

discuss our, our... (*Raises one finger aloft.*) ... our troubles. (*Raises second finger aloft.*) ...hardships. (*Raises third finger aloft.*) ...problems. And... (*Releases Textina and raises one finger of the freed hand.*) ...victories. (*Raises second finger.*) ...joys. (*Raises second finger.*)...successes. Delete as appropriate. The main thing is to get it all off your chest.

Although the memory of my ex-lover still has the power to make me angry and bring back thoughts of my feminist period, I've moved on from all that. A woman must be strict with a man. Not long ago, I came up with this ingenious idea. A prenup equivalent for lovers, defining the responsibilities of the man and the rights of the mistress. This nonsense brought me smoothly to my next idea. That I could go into politics.

Textina: (*Nods to show her enthusiasm for this idea.*)

Simona: But a problem arose almost immediately. Which party should I join? Right-wing or left-wing? (*Points to her right, then to her left.*) Should I consider this self or that self. In any case, my brief career as a feminist had shown me that in any established party I would be making coffee for men for years. After a period of brief, mature reflection, I gave up thoughts of entering politics and returned to my tried-and-tested model – once every four years I show up at the polling station, put my hand to my heart (*she demonstrates*), do my duty, then forget all about it.

Stick with what you know. Anyway, my fellow athletes, let's move on. Write this down. Drinking habits. I'm talking about staying hydrated, not about hitting the booze. A half-marathon isn't the big league. Regular replenishing of fluids is a must. Four to six pints a day, maybe more on hot days. Ten out of ten marathon runners recommend mineral water, vegetable juices, fruit infusions and unsweetened fruit juices. After a race, a little alcohol, not least wine, is also recommended. It's good for the heart.

Textina: (*Points to her heart. Performs a deep knee bend.*)

Simona: Top-level boozing is out of the question, however. And one more thing about poisons. Smoking is bad for the health, of runners and non-runners alike. Smoking is strictly forbidden. That's non-negotiable. Except for the victor's cigar, which applies only to those who finish in tenth place or above.

Luckily, smoking passed me by. As I'm weak-willed, after my first

shy attempts to inhale at primary school, I gave it up, and in puberty I never went back to it. Anyway, I've had enough problems without adding smoking to the list. To sum up, I was the class swot but also a rebel. I've wanted to be a feminist, a party-girl, a nympho, a gold-digger and a politician, and I've been a mistress. Remember the character in the old movie who says, "He who does harm to others, lives best"? Well, I did think of becoming a cold-hearted bitch. But there are so many bastards and bitches about, the competition is massive. So, as things stand, it looks like I'll be a singleton – a modern, self-sufficient, emancipated young woman who's alone. What a dreadful prospect!

Textina: *(Shrugs.)*

Simona: As I picked my way through the tatters and chaos of my life, I came to one fixed, inescapable point. School was over, and if I wanted a degree, I had to pass my finals. I wrote my dissertation on – what else? – running. At a faculty of sports science, text messaging doesn't count as writing. The subtitle of my work was: 'The battle with the 21<sup>st</sup>-century pandemic that is obesity'. Anyway, I strung together some wannabe wise words about how we eat too much and move too little and I performed a dissection on running as one of the weapons by which this battle is waged. At the *viva voce*, the examining committee wasn't much impressed. The longer I spoke, the more convinced I became that the committee was composed of versions of my mum. No one was listening to me. So it's no wonder I lost my temper. Digressing from the conclusions of my work, I asked the committee a rhetorical question: What would happen if everyone on Earth suddenly started running against the rotation direction of the globe? I gave the answer myself: It would lead neither to global warming nor to a new ice age; if the people ran for long enough, it would lead to *en masse* human weight loss. At this point, some members of the committee woke up and began to leaf through my work. I forged ahead. In all seriousness, I announced that if some king were to prohibit running in his kingdom, you could be sure that many of his people would take to their heels and flee straight over the border, for running is a basic human need. By now, the whole committee was awake. So I ploughed on. Running is not a religion, I said, although many people swear by it. Nor is it a drug, as it brings with it no psychedelic dreams. Nor is it a necessity, as we have cars and aeroplanes. Running is a philosophy. Running means being thin, healthy and efficient; the beauty of athleticism is just a bonus. Running is a joy. Running is emotion. Running is a positive approach to life. So, what does all this mean? I'm afraid I

don't know. The room fell silent. The committee chair looked to the others. Then he fixed me with a hard stare, which I returned. At last, he said: "Run along, will you." Fortunately, this meant that I had passed.

I celebrated this success by going for a run. That it meant the end of my youth, I tried not to think about. From now on, all I had to look forward to until my retirement – for which, they tell us, there will be no money left – was work. It's rumoured that there are eyewitnesses who have seen the bottom of the state treasury, huge that it is. *(Simona and Textina stretch out their arms as far as they will go.)*

Even so, I was glad that school was over. But for every joy, there's a sorrow, isn't there?

Textina: *(Goes to Simona and hands her a card in an envelope.)* I can't read that.

Simona: *(Opens the envelope, withdraws the card and reads aloud.)* Luke and Annette are pleased to announce that they will marry on... *(Falls silent.)* Well, well, well, Luke's getting married. *(Looks at the card again.)* But not to me! It says here he's marrying someone called Annette. *(Looks around helplessly.)* My Luke is getting married! *(Waving the card, she shrieks:)* And the git didn't even have the courage to tell me by text! How do you explain that?

Textina: *(Waves her arms about, to express that it's not her fault.)*

Simona: So endeth true love! With an announcement on a scrap of paper. No third poem for me, then. I shall have to tell myself that I've cast off a burden. That I'm free again. And I mustn't cry. Girls don't cry. Nor do text messages. *(Her face puckers up: she is on the verge of tears.)* Girls and text messages never cry. Shit! *(Turns her back on the audience.)*

Textina: *(Crosses her fingers, wishing for the best.)*

Simona: *(Turns back to the audience, with an expression of false jollity.)* As it turns out, my middle name is probably Indecision. How can I make a purposeful start to my career when I make all the wrong choices? The two men I wanted let me go, the one I don't want won't let me go. Sometimes I feel like a crazy ecologist who is against wind power on Monday, hydroelectric on Tuesday, nuclear on Wednesday, coal-fired energy on Thursday, solar on Friday, and

spends her weekends in the forest fighting bark beetles. Maybe fighting *with* bark beetles. I just don't know anymore. Sometimes I ask myself if it's my fault. But how can it be? It's men who have faults, not women.

Textina: *(Nods in keen agreement.)*

Simona: "I'm a sucker for a dog's life." That's a quote from a favourite character in a favourite film of mine. But otherwise I'm a sensitive, vulnerable soul. A general on the outside, on the inside a bundle of confusion. I don't have much belief in myself. Actually, running is just an escape for me. But that doesn't make me any less of a professional. A professional hired and paid for by you. And why should you care about my problems? I'm sure you've got enough of your own.

Textina: *(Nods knowingly at the audience.)*

Simona: And that, dear friends and comrades in arms, is the end of today's lesson. Enough relaxation and theory. Next time we will meet at the running track, and you'll be in sweatpants. And you'll learn how strict and uncompromising I can be; if you're a man, you may find that I have a vindictive streak. We'll build up to the half-marathon gradually, running first an inch, then a yard, then a mile, and so on. One moment, please. *(She taps in a text. Textina looks over Simona's shoulder to see what she is writing, before walking over to the audience.)* Believe me, friends, when you reach the finish line, all the effort will have been worth it... *(She looks at Textina.)*

Textina: There's no better feeling. Believe me.

Simona: *(Waving goodbye.)* And remember, friends – if you don't run with us, you run against us. I'll see you on the victors' podium yet! Three cheers for running! Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray! *(Running on the spot and waving.)* See you next time!

Textina: *(Running and waving with Simona.)* Beep. Beep. Beep.

